AH-LING OF PEKING

A ROMANCE OF OLD CHINA

古華奇緣

MIRIAM HARRIMAN

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BY

MIRIAM HARRIMAN

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TO

MOTHER *and* FATHER

IN MEMORY OF OUR HAPPY DAYS
SPENT TOGETHER IN PEKING

WTS

PART ONE

"And I have ta'en the lute, my only friend:
The vibrant chords beneath my fingers blend;
They sob awhile, then as they slip control
Immortal memories awake, and the dear years
Through deathless voices answer to my strings,
Till from the brink of Time's untarnished springs
The melting night recalls me with her tears."

PART ONE

THE last rays of sun flickered across Peking, casting shadows on the great walls of the Forbidden City, while the golden-yellow tiled roofs of the palace sparkled beneath the waning light.

Only the distant twang of a lute broke the silence in the marble courtyard. The weirdly plaintive music ceased and a young Chinese girl stood within the doorway. The lute slipped from her fingers as she fell upon her knees with hands outstretched in supplication and head bowed before an ancestral shrine.

She remained motionless as the minutes passed. Gradually the dark head lifted and troubled eyes gazed up above the memorial. From her heart came a fervent whispered prayer—"Oh, God, whom I have learned to love through foreign teaching, I beg thee—

I beseech thee, protect the honorable foreigners from the evil Boxers! Almighty Father, show me a way to help them. I give my life if need be."

Her eyes lowered and rested upon the ancestral shrine, the pleading tones continued—"Oh, honorable ancestors through the ages, who have protected thy children, I beg thee open the hearts and eyes of this generation to the horrible wrong they are about to commit upon the foreign brothers here in the city of our ancestors. Restrain the mighty and powerful hand of the Empress Dowager from signing the order of the massacre, for oh! most noble and illustrious ancestors, the shame will never fade which will be cast upon our beloved and honorable Dragon Kingdom if Old Buddha, the Grand Council and Jung Lu, my august father, decree this act."

Ah-Ling appeared to have gained strength through her heart-wrung prayers and arose.

Could it be possible that the hand of Death and Destruction lay waiting outside

these walls? Peace and beauty of the ages lay enclosed here. Delicate incense filled the air, burning from bronze braziers; lotus buds in great blue bowls seemed to pour forth all their strength, vying in fragrance with the incense. Soft candlelight from ancient jade lanterns brought forth the superb coloring in velvet and gold brocade, illuminating lacquer and delicate carving on screens and walls.

An old man gently parted the draperies and entered the chamber. A tender, anxious expression came to the wrinkled face as he gazed in silent contemplation at the girl and finally spoke to her—

"Ah-Ling, I heard thee play on thy lute such longing tones, surely thy honorable ancestors have heard thee, whate'er thy prayers may be. But perchance thy old tutor can help. Come tell me, child, what ails thee, for my heart grieves to see trouble written on thy dear face."

Ah-Ling had not been aware of the presence of the old man, and turned with out-

stretched hands to grasp those of her beloved teacher.

"Oh, Chêng-Su, indeed trouble and sorrow have come, fleet on the wings of the ill-omened bat, and I am in despair! My august father was reading to me ancient poetry and a slave came bidding him to a conference with Her Majesty. My honorable father bade me ponder on the verses until his return, and when he returned, Chêng-Su, my honorable father was as white as the scroll in his hand.

" 'My daughter,' said he, 'Thou knowest, the trouble that has been going on with the foreigners here in Peking. I have always disliked these foreign White Devils, yet have urged that no harm come to them, for dishonor would descend upon the Empire; but now the situation has developed to such a state that a decree has been signed that all foreigners within the Celestial City shall be wiped out to-morrow at the hour of the cock. I am thankful that I have never allowed thee to know the foreigners. At my age the idea

of bloodshed, and being one to command it, makes me shudder and tremble—but, my Lotus Flower, read to me, and let us forget all but the wise and beauteous counsel of the sages.'

"Thou alone, Chêng-Su, who have been my tutor and friend from babyhood, can realize how my heart stopped at these words. Thou knowest how austere is my honorable father and I knew I must find my voice and plead that he use his influence to suppress this horrible deed. I pretended the rice paper leaves had stuck together in order that I might have time to gain composure.

" 'Did my Noble Father believe that the Gods of China wished this frightful massacre, and if it was against their wishes, was it not true that the shame would never fade from our Imperial Kingdom?'

"My father waxed wrath at these words, for indeed my humble opinion had not been asked, but my heart could not remain silent.

"Oh, Chêng-Su, it is many, many moons since first thou tookest me secretly to see

thy sister in the British Legation, and Diana Maynard and I first played together. We have grown to maidenhood, our friendship growing in deeper affection and love. It is for us, Chêng-Su, the only two people in this palace who sympathize with the foreigners, to help them.

"Surely, surely thou wilt think of a way. My poor head is awhirl like the water-wheel! Think! Think what must be done, for there remain only a few hours in which Kwanlin, thy Goddess of Mercy, can help thee or the Bridge of Death will have been crossed."

The old man remained silent, shaking his head. "Ah-Ling," he said gravely, "thou knowest well how we are kept prisoners here in the Forbidden City, and only by great secrecy and bribery in the early morning, when a few went once a moon to visit Ta Hsi Tien, the temple of the Great Western Heaven, could we steal a visit to my sister in the foreign quarter, and thou couldst see the British Minister's

young daughter. Thy words bring fear and sorrow to me, for we are helpless as babes to offer protection or give warning. Thou knowest well how the gates of the Forbidden City are guarded. No one may enter or leave the sacred walls without Royal permission, which is all difficult to obtain, and without authority—there is the death penalty. The hour is late; while we have talked, the celestial sun has gone to rest behind the veil of darkness."

A muffled beating of drums and a strange chanting came from the courtyard. An old, bent man, evidently blind, for he grasped a stick with which he was feeling his way, and a young boy were crossing the courtyard. The boy was cloaked in a long scarlet coat and a little round cap of the same brilliant color, and chanted while beating on a drum, with low, monotonous taps.

Ah-Ling put her hand to her head. Was it not sufficiently difficult to think at this critical time without distraction? It was old Kin-Wu, the soothsayer, and his grand-

son who, clothed in red, beat on a drum to frighten away the evil spirits. It was Kin-Wu's semi-annual visit to the Imperial City. Renowned through China as an astrologer, he had been commanded to the city to foretell the future to members of the court. Kin-Wu and the boy, Yi-Na, were about to enter one of the doors across the courtyard when Ah-Ling cried out, "Haste, haste, Chêng-Su. Tell Kin-Wu I must have words with him. A sudden whim tells me by chance through him, we may find a way. True, he also hates the foreigners and would betray our secret to aid them, but go bid him come to me."

Chêng-Su stopped the old man, and in a few words told him a noble lady of the court wished him at her side immediately. Meanwhile Ah-Ling's mind was working rapidly, grasping at any possible way which might afford help.

Kin-Wu and Yi-Na approached slowly across the courtyard, and when they came

to the door, Ah-Ling spoke in a voice soft and clear as the temple bell.

"Kin-Wu, master of the Great Unknown, a Manchu maid stands before thee in dire distress. She implores thee to come to her before leaving the palace to-night, and read the message the stars must hold for her."

Kin-Wu bowed his shaggy head and tapped on the ground with the stick. Once more the drumming and chanting held forth as the strange pair continued on their way.

Old Chêng-Su closed the heavily carved doors and looked at Ah-Ling inquiringly. She placed her hand in his and with suppressed excitement began to unfold the plan which had come.

"Chêng-Su," she explained in low tones, close to the old man's ear, " I shall write a warning message and whilst thou keepest Kin-Wu in conversation, I shall seek to bribe the boy Yi-Na to take it to the Legation. Truly it is the God of Good-fortune who has sent Kin-Wu here to-night." Relief was in the young voice, as she paused for breath.

Chêng-Su opened his lips as though to arrest her words. What mortal danger lay in wait if treachery influence the boy? But Ah-Ling continued—"Surely the spirit of my illustrious ancestors will not fail me and will guide me on this hazardous path. Remain thou here Chêng-Su, while I write the message. Fear not, and trust thy Ah-Ling."

Sliding back a panel, she clapped her hands. A small slave soon appeared, bearing fragrant sun-dried tea, opium and water pipes. Thoughts raced through the outwardly calm little body as Ah-Ling sat at the carved sandalwood writing table in her room, a few moments later.

The foreigners must be outside the Tartar City gates, the last wall guarding Peking, for only at that distance from the city would they escape the fiendish Boxers, doubtless concentrating on the city in their murderous pursuit.

Dared she trust the message of life or death to an unknown boy? The risk was too great, for the message might not ever reach

its destination. The thought chilled her with terror and ever stronger came the realization that, no matter where the danger lay, she herself must go. In this hour of trial had she the courage to face unknown peril, perhaps death, which might come outside the Forbidden City walls or through punishment here within? From infancy courage had been the first word and maxim taught in the Book of Wisdom—infallible to the proud Manchu—and was she not a Manchu?

Love and sacrifice were the great Christian God's commands and was she not now, above all else, a Christian? Strength and determination entered the courageous spirit; the brush ready to inscribe the message was tossed aside. With head bowed in hands she remained, thinking, planning, fortifying herself for the task ahead. But time was passing rapidly by, and it was essential to make ready with all haste.

Before a beautiful lacquer dressing-case Ah-Ling removed the pearl and jade orna-

ments from the shining black hair, which she then braided down her back. Magnificent jeweled rings covered the frail little hands, and these, with the gold wrought nail protectors, were hastily laid aside. The charming blue and gold brocade jacket and jade green trousers, also the tiny embroidered padded slippers, were quickly exchanged for those of simpler and darker coloring.

The heavy paint and powder of the court were rubbed off, revealing the clear, creamy skin and exquisite faint line of eyebrow above the unfathomable brown eyes.

Little Ah-Ling was irresistible in her delicate patrician charm and beauty, transformed from a Manchu to a native maid.

The beating of the drum and chanting came from the courtyard. Ah-Ling hastened back again to Chêng-Su, peacefully smoking the pipe of dreams, while the soothsayer and boy awaited at the threshold.

Great drops of rain fell faster and faster, as the wind howled in fitful gales around the courtyard. The heavens assured a severe

storm, and angry clouds covered moon and stars in the blanket of darkness.

Kin-Wu announced with regret that he must depart at once, before the storm made it impossible to find the way home.

With fast-beating heart Ah-Ling came close to Chêng-Su and whispered—"Fear not. Thy Ah-Ling will soon return. Do not try to follow me, for it will endanger my life."

The old man, drowsy with opium-smoking, and in the dim light, had not noticed the changed attire, and only now came the realization of what Ah-Ling planned to do. Before he could protest or hold her, the small dark figure was lost outside in the night. His befuddled brain told him he must pursue her, but how could he—lame and feeble? Ah-Ling's words rang in his ears—"Do not try to follow me, for it will endanger my life." While dread fear held him in its clutches, it appeared an impossibility to wait—a dumb beholder of disaster.

PART TWO

"Clouds burst, skies flash, oh, dreadful hour!
More fiercely pours the storm!
Yet here one thought has still the power
To keep my bosom warm."

PART TWO

THE storm had reached its height. The heavens opened and scarcely could one see a pace ahead. Keeping well in back of Kin-Wu and Yi-Na's lantern, it was an eternity to Ah-Ling before a gleam of lamplight, faint as a pale star, shone through the wind and rain, dimly outlining the great Forbidden City Wall Gate. What chance of fortune would help now? So much depended on getting through this first gate, which was more guarded than the second of the Imperial City.

As they approached the watch-house Yi-Na tried to beat on his drum, but the storm was fighting hard, and human strength was futile in combating the rage of the God of Tempests. The boy's shouts

were heard at last, and guttural tones demanded who would go out on such a night. Holding the lantern above his head, Yi-Na's red coat and hat, streaming with rain, served him well, for he was recognized by the guard and the lofty gates swung open without further delay.

Ah-Ling, breathless in anxiety and excitement, pressed close to the man and boy, and passed through as the clang of the iron bars sounded at their back. Filled with intense relief and joy she hastily dropped back again out of the lantern's shadow. With lowered head she fought against the pelting rain and stinging wind, lifting her straining eyes now and then to search the distance for the light of the watch-house. But not a ray of light broke the inky blackness. At first she quieted her perplexed anxiety with the thought and belief that the light must be there but unable to penetrate the dense, stormy night. However, as the walls of the Forbidden City were left farther and farther behind, the disquieting feeling would

not be stilled that all was not well at the City Gates.

Twice the old soothsayer had to stop, exhausted, but there was no rest standing still with the torrent of rain lashing their faces, and the boy Yi-Na would urge that they continue, supporting the old man as best he could with one arm, while clutching the lantern in the other hand. In a particularly strong and fierce gust of wind, the flickering light of the lantern all but went out, causing added apprehension to Ah-Ling and Yi-Na, for such a mishap would leave them groping helplessly in the dark. It was in the hands of Providence whether Kin-Wu would be able to bear up against the storm, for if he collapsed, Yi-Na would never have the needed strength to carry him; and what would happen then? Ah-Ling dared not think.

Above the whistling gale, every now and then the querulous, irritable voice of the soothsayer would rise, asking in anxious tones how near they were to the gate.

Yi-Na would try to appease him with encouraging monosyllables, which grew more and more doubtful, as he also anxiously wondered what had happened that no rays of light emitted from the distance where the watch-house must be located.

At last the endless way came to an end. Only Yi-Na's lantern outlined the dark sentry tower with not a sign of life about. It was a desperate thought that flashed through Ah-Ling that their departure was to be blocked here, behind gates barred from the outside world, with no alternative but to wait for the morning and all the fearful accompaniments. It could not be, fate would not be so cruel.

Yi-Na took Kin-Wu's stick and with resounding blows struck at the door of the gate house. Not a sound issued from within. From the deep shadows Ah-Ling watched. At length she stole over to the gates and with raised arms groped for the bolt—the great iron bar was not across the gate. With hopeful excitement she wondered if this

signified that the gate was open. She would try to pull the door back. Just then Yi-Na came from around the corner of the house, having ceased in his efforts to find the guard. Ah-Ling hastily drew back out of the lantern's rays, and with fast-beating heart she awaited their fate, which would be known in a moment's time.

Yi-Na placed the lantern in Kin-Wu's hand, warning him to keep it steady. A moment of anxious waiting, then in agitated tones Yi-Na called to Kin-Wu to raise the lantern higher. Ah-Ling then saw distinctly that the great iron bolt was drawn back and not across the gate. Now it only remained to pull open the heavy doors and squeeze through. Ah-Ling felt she must shout—the relief was so intense. But what had happened to leave the gate unguarded? The only solution could be that the lanterns had failed and the watch had gone to renew them. Yi-Na taxed all his strength to pull the gate open a little way, and as he turned

to take the lantern from Kin-Wu, Ah-Ling noiselessly slipped through.

She pressed against the wall, remaining motionless, and saw Kin-Wu and Yi-Na vanish in the distance. The excitement of the safe escape, battling the storm and shivering with wet and cold, left her near exhaustion.

Fortunately the wind had shifted, while the rain changed into a misty drizzle. How terrifying it was alone in the desolate black city. What hidden peril lay in the vast darkness broken by a scattering of shadowy lights?

On and on, her tiny feet aching painfully from the unaccustomed exercise. Many hours must have passed since she left Chêng-Su and the warm, dry palace. When would the Legation buildings loom through the haze to give hope? At times in the night's darkness, it was as though she must open her eyes to find it all a hideous dream.

Hands and feet were numb with cold. It could not be far now. Always before, when

in chair or rickshaw, it had seemed such a short distance from the Forbidden City to the foreign quarter. Was it possible to have mistaken the direction? With great consternation she stopped and peered to right and left. Through the silence came the deep, serene chimes of a clock, as though a Heaven-sent message to soothe the soul. Joy and relief leapt in her heart, for only the British Legation chapel had a clock like this in all Peking. It sounded very near, and as though a curtain had lifted, a great iron gate appeared out of the mist. A foreign soldier was on guard, pacing inside the grounds.

Ah-Ling came close to the gate, calling, "Hi-Ya, Hi-Ya—please let me in. I must speak to Miss Maynard at once." The guard halted and looked through the gate with astonishment, to see a bedraggled little Chinese maid at midnight demanding, in perfect English, to speak with Miss Maynard. However, the voice was so urgent, he partly opened the gate, while Ah-Ling con-

tinued—"You must see it is all-important that I should see Miss Maynard. I am her friend, please take me to her at once, or I must go alone."

Before the guard had time to close the gate, after letting Ah-Ling in, she was hastening ahead. He quickly latched the entrance and followed. Entering one of the low houses, she knew the way to the bedroom and gently opened the door. Going directly to the bedside she knelt and took Diana Maynard's hand, while the girl opened startled eyes. Was this an apparition or really little Ah-Ling who gazed so earnestly at her and now spoke?

"Have no fear Diana, my beloved, it is thy Ah-Ling.

"I have heard from my august father that by Her Majesty Tzu Hsi's command, this day, at the hour of the cock, all foreigners here in Peking are to be massacred. All the Legation must flee at once and be outside the native city walls by that hour."

Diana was wide awake now and threw a

cover hastily about the shivering little form at her side. This rumor then, was not false, which had passed from mouth to mouth within the last days, that the Imperial Court was planning some fearful revenge upon the foreigners. For now in all reality came the gruesome truth and there was no time to be lost.

Without a word Diana leapt from bed and slipped into robe and slippers. "Come, Ah-Ling," she said, "we will go to my father. He will know what is to be done."

In an astoundingly short time all the Legation had been called. They were dressing hurriedly and gathering together their most valued possessions.

The first faint light of a new day broke through the night while the frightened and excited people got under way in chairs and rickshaws, after many threats and entreaties to sleepy and bewildered coolies.

The Legation Staff were to remain at their post, but many others, although urged by the Minister and secretaries, also refused

to leave the Legation, believing it an impossibility that they would not be officially warned. The Minister insisted upon his wife and daughter going to the summer house outside of Peking in the hills. With them went the wives and children of the secretaries.

The earnest entreaties and beseechings of all were in vain. Ah-Ling would not go with them, and remained firm in her resolution to return alone to the Forbidden City. "If I am missed," she said, "they will send searchers for me, and if I am found with the foreigners, the Boxers, in their revenge and wrath, will massacre us all. There is no time to tell how I escaped from the Forbidden City; but I believe the Great God and the spirit of my ancestors will lead me safely back."

The two girls were in each other's arms, tears streaming down their faces—the immobility of the Chinese gone from Ah-Ling's face, as it expressed deep anguish.

"Diana, dear one," she said at last, "do

not thank me, it is little that I have done. I love thee as the flowers love the sun, and, more than friendship and love, thou hast given me the light of life. Surely when great love is put in our hearts for a purpose, and we use it not, ever after life would be a gray day. We have been in each other's lives for some true purpose. It cannot be that we are to be parted forever: our paths in life will meet again."

At the gate Ah-Ling watched Diana and the others disappear in the distance, and a cruel pang of loneliness tugged at her heart as she started for the Forbidden City.

Until now there had been little thought how the return to the Forbidden City was to be made. Each step in the great adventure had been taken with a feeling of deep gratitude at its safe accomplishment. To reach Diana had been the great aim. Now, with cold fear and despair creeping around her heart, she stumbled on.

Life in the Imperial City had been one of lonely, silent dreams for Ah-Ling.

Dreams which could not be breathed to a soul for fear of discovery. The visits to Diana were the inspiring joy in her otherwise monotonous days, filled with the duties of a Manchu court lady.

It was necessary for women to suppress all thoughts which were not in strict accordance with the philosophers. Knowledge and education were not for them, only strict seclusion within court and home, where children and grandchildren dwelt under the same roof tree. Duty lay in the complete subservience to father and husband, while honor came only with the accomplishment of their true mission in life—bringing sons into the world who, in turn, paid devotion to the mother.

Jung Lu was wise and just in his power over the Empire, though stern and unrelenting in his judgment. The one tender place in his heart was devoted to Ah-Ling. She, in turn, had a true filial affection for her father, without understanding often his ruthless actions.

Ah-Ling ever tended the hope that a time would come when it would be possible to tell him the happiness which Diana had brought into her life. Now all this cherished dream had been torn away.

Weary and troubled, she prayed that the strength which was well-nigh spent would not fail entirely in this final hour.

Could she but reach the sacred wall, she would wait for some unforeseen way of entering, trusting to be taken for a beggar maid and to be left unmolested.

Now all at once it became strangely dark to Ah-Ling, and heaven and earth seemed fused in one. Involuntarily her outstretched arms groped for the light her clouded senses believed there, but oblivion wrapped her in its folds and carried her to the ground in a swoon.

PART THREE

"'Tis all a chequer-board of nights and days
Where destiny with men for pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the closet lays."

PART THREE

THE palace, to all appearances, was enshrouded in dark serenity as the hours sped by, but within the soul of Jung Lu and old Chêng-Su there was profound agitation from different sources.

The old tutor had remained in the Ancestral Chamber, becoming more and more alarmed as the night slipped away and his thoughts became more fearful of the consequences the new day would bring.

Jung Lu found his conscience stirring discomforting doubts, which under Old Buddha's domineering power had been suppressed. Deprived of sleep and rest he wandered to the Ancestral Chamber for meditation.

The dejection of Chêng-Su seemed to unite with the gloom of the room, for the light of the lanterns had gone out and the

remaining candlelight flickered in dismal sympathy.

Jung Lu, as his noiseless footstep fell upon the thick rug, hesitated. Was that a stifled groan? Who could be here? It must be his harassed imagination. A shadow fell across the shrine. He started, and quickly turned to meet the frightened eyes of Chêng-Su. Neither spoke for a moment. Jung Lu was sorely vexed to have his already disquieted being startled in this way.

He held the old tutor in high esteem for his wisdom and devotion to Ah-Ling, but he must be reaching his dotage to spend the night in here.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded of Chêng-Su in stern tones. Chêng-Su was thoroughly frightened; he, too, had received a shock and was trembling with every breath. Jung Lu had never seen the placid old scholar in this state: no doubt there was some mischief afoot.

Old Chêng-Su was too inexperienced in

deception for successful concealment, and was torn between attempting to withhold his guilty knowledge or to confess everything. It might be that at this very moment Ah-Ling was in peril and was calling in vain for help. If he told all now, perhaps it would not be too late to save her. The lives of the foreigners were of no account when weighed against her life.

"Answer me," commanded Jung Lu threateningly. He was not going to stand here forever while Chêng-Su endeavored to gather his quaking wits.

"Ah-Ling," commenced Chêng-Su, and stopped. The sound of his voice and what he was about to say, took away his control of speech.

Alarm leapt in Jung Lu. "Ah-Ling?" he queried with raised voice.

"Oh, Excellency," burst forth Chêng-Su, "terror fills my heart, for Ah-Ling has gone to warn the foreigners. Oh, save her! save her!"

The old man's entreaties turned into wails

as his self-control gave way and he twisted his hands and writhed in apprehension.

"Gone to warn the foreigners!" exclaimed the astounded and dismayed Jung Lu. "Incredible; impossible." It took a moment's time to grasp the fact.

"How dared thou let her go; how dared thou keep this secret?" ejaculated the more and more infuriated Jung Lu.

"Answer me, or art thou turned dumb as well as traitor. Tell me all thy part in this treacherous affair."

Realizing it would now be fatal to conceal anything, Chêng-Su told of the visits to the Legation, the devotion of Ah-Ling and the English girl, and then of the unexpected flight to the foreigners. Jung Lu allowed the old man to tell everything without interruption, while he listened, head bent forward, hands closing convulsively, the long nails digging into the flesh—anger steadily rising within him.

The passionate fury of the Empress' favorite was renowned within the sacred walls

—but never could it be described in its reality. The big form quivered and seemed to grow gigantic in stature; the slanting eyes were as burning coals; the mouth drawn down, nostrils distended, while the face became a sickly hue. Chêng-Su, terrorized at the spectacle, and cringing at the prospect of what might happen, waited—waited. Two long strides brought Jung Lu within arm's reach. With both hands he seized Chêng-Su about the throat and threw him on his back, deliberately squeezing the breath out of the lungs, until the tongue lay still on the discolored face and the gasping and gurgling ceased. It had been done scarcely without a sound and in a few seconds' time. Jung Lu did not even glance at the still form, as he silently disappeared behind the draperies.

PART FOUR

"The moving finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on: Nor all thy Piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

PART FOUR

TO the native city of Peking it was only one of a million similar nights, hushed in peace and tranquillity. Not a murmur in the air whispered of the impending bombardment. Not an inkling came to the multitude of the ferment in the Legation or of the aroused fury in Court. Almost as day broke and the fresh wind of coming morning swept over the city, a mounted guard rode out of the Forbidden City and sped down the broad highway toward the Legation quarters. The Commander had orders to bring Ah-Ling, daughter of His Excellency Jung Lu, dead or alive to the Imperial City. The horses' hoofs shook the ground, scattering thick mud in all directions. A little crumpled figure lay at the side of the road, and a rider pulled up his Mongolian pony barely in

time to avoid trampling it under foot. In reigning in, he swerved to the side of the road and collided with another pony, and ponies and riders were all thrown to the ground. Amidst shouts and curses they disentangled themselves.

Ah-Ling opened dazed eyes and tried to arise. One of the soldiers caught sight of her as he was about to mount, and called to his companion. They led their ponies over to the half-reclining huddled form. As the guardsmen approached, Ah-Ling cowered and hid her face in her arm. Where, oh where was she? The mind was groping in consciousness—the events of the past hours trying to force themselves into the memory.

One of the soldiers spoke in a loud, excited voice—"Who art thou, maid, and why out here on the highway at break of day?"

Receiving no reply he shook her by the arm, none too gently. Pain and anger awakened the confused mind with a swift realization of her plight. She must conceal her identity. Still keeping her face averted

she replied in dull, faint voice—"I am a beggar maid. Let me rest." They remained looking at her for a few moments, undecided, talking in an undertone, then, apparently satisfied with the answer, mounted the ponies and galloped off after the others, now far in the distance.

Ah-Ling struggled to her feet. Were they seeking her? Had they discovered her absence? The Imperial Cavalry Guard was ordered out only under the Empress' direct command; no one else held this power. The hope died within her that her escape was known only to her father.

It was imperative to walk on in all haste, in spite of stiff and aching body. So deep was she in contemplation, that a galloping pony halted at the roadside before she was aware of its approach. The rider dismounted hastily and looked closely at Ah-Ling. It was the same horseman who had spoken to her before. With fear and apprehension came a wild desire to hide, but the open road offered no place for concealment.

Before the guardsman spoke, instinct told of coming danger.

"In the name of Her Majesty," he said, "I command thee to come to the Forbidden City Gate."

Alas, all pleadings were in vain. It was apparent the more she appealed, the more persistent became the guardsman in his intention to take her to the Forbidden City entrance. With threatening tones he helped her on to the pony's back and mounted behind.

Overcome with humility and fear, she could scarcely contain her grief. Arriving at the Great Gates, the guardsman gave a watchword and they passed through to the Imperial City Entrance. Here the trembling girl was lifted down while the soldier and sentries held heated discussion. The former, after much argument, persuaded the sentinels to send word to Po T'ung, chief secretary of His Excellency Jung Lu, to come and identify the maid. Reaching this conclusion, they turned their attention to

Ah-Ling, leading her to a bench in the sentry house, where she droopingly sank, her frail body shivering in the early morning air.

The discussion had been in subdued tones. Only now and then when the soldier seemed to be failing in his argument did the voices rise and a word become distinguishable. Undoubtedly they were sending for some one to identify her. The situation held little hope, for there were few in the Imperial Court who did not know the only daughter of Jung Lu. And then what cruel or merciful fate awaited?

All at once the crash of shooting rent the air, followed by waves of dense smoke rising from behind the distant walls. With heart in throat Ah-Ling saw the beginning of the devastating bombardment. Her tormented thoughts beat with longing to know if Diana were out of harm's way. Alas, what deliverance was there now for those remaining in Peking!

Through the gateway from the Forbidden

City came a chair swinging from the shoulders of four bearers. A similar, but vacant, chair followed. The first chair was lowered and from it alighted in all regalia Po T'ung, His Excellency Jung Lu's first secretary. The guardsmen kotowed respectfully and led him to Ah-Ling. With bowed head she awaited the verdict of the official who had known her from early childhood, but who had never seen her without the disguise of paint and powder. In cold, disconcerted voice Po T'ung demanded if she were Ah-Ling, daughter of His Excellency Jung Lu. A reply was needless. Without hesitation he turned to the others and said without doubt, "It is she."

Bursting from her pent-up silence Ah-Ling imploringly besought compassion, begging to be conveyed secretly to the Court. Her supplications fell on merciless ears and were stilled as she was ordered to enter the empty chair. Po T'ung had also received Imperial commands, which were to be carried out without delay or deviation.

The din of the aroused and inflamed native city grew in riotous uproar. Terror, anger, chagrin in turn reanimated Ah-Ling's spirits, followed by utter despair at her very helplessness.

When the first firing of the Boxers upon the Foreign Quarters reached the Empress Dowager's ears, she summoned an audience to the Hall of Diligent Government for the purpose of taking counsel for future action.

As the chair-bearers halted before the Great Hall, Ah-Ling furtively parted the curtains and looked out. With dread panic came the realization that she was to be taken at once before the Empress and the Council. With trembling knees she alighted from the chair and entered the magnificent court-room. Only on rare and infrequent occasions, when under grave sentence, were women allowed within its judicial walls. Fear mingled with awe in entering these revered portals. All her life she had passed the impressive building with solemn wonder,

knowing that the momentous affairs of the Empire were determined there.

Some learned magistrate was holding forth in a loud declamatory manner as the herald proclaimed the arrivals. The speaker abruptly ceased his utterances, while suppressed excitement stirred the assembly and all eyes turned toward the entrance.

As Ah-Ling faced the curious, pitiless gaze of the throng, she was conscious of being detached — forsaken. Her heart seemed to have ceased beating.

The Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi was enthroned in the distant end of the court. At her right, upon the dais, sat His Excellency Jung Lu. Ah-Ling, though distraught, instinctively kotowed with head to ground, and was summoned to approach the throne.

With the slow and graceful swaying motion of the bamboo, she made her way the length of the majestic hall. Lifting her eyes within a few feet of the throne, she was startled to meet the glaring green eyes and gaping mouths of the huge gold dragons

whose writhing backs supported the great dais. To Ah-Ling's overwrought imagination, their barbarous fangs and claws waited to close upon her as she sank once more to the ground in obeisance.

The stillness which pervades the atmosphere before a storm, diffused the hall—held the assemblage in breathless tension. The Empress Dowager arose from the throne in her fury. Resonant, wrathful tones issued from her throat.

"No tongue of eloquence can speak befitting words to thee, O child of iniquity. Thou hast betrayed the kingdom of thy ancestors and wickedly broken the holy laws of the Imperial City in endeavoring to aid the foreign villains. Speak, if thou canst pacify in any manner the fury of the Gods."

Ah-Ling had remained prostrate; now she arose. The words came falteringly, then grew stronger as she lost herself in the justice of her plea.

"Oh, illustrious Majesty," she began, "the princes and officials of the Imperial

City, consumed with jealousy and greed of power, conceive wicked plots against your Royal Majesty, blaming the foreigners for treacherous intrigues of which they are ignorant. The foreigners desire only peace and friendship between the nations. Cannot China meet them halfway over the Bridge of Understanding?

"Oh, most honorable Majesty, the spirit of our illustrious ancestors calls entreatingly for thee to stop this infamous act."

Ah-Ling sank on knees with forehead to ground in homage.

The astonished assemblage had expected a terrified maid pleading for life: instead it was a supplication for mercy upon the white devils. With wonder and expectancy they watched the Empress. What judgment was being passed upon the maid as the August One gazed down upon her in silence? Imagination could not divine the thoughts and emotions evolved in that extraordinarily brilliant, vacillating mind concealed behind the inscrutable expression.

With fierce contempt and impatience came the hissing words—"I would that I knew what evil magic the sly foreigners practice to ensnare others into their wicked power."

Righteous indignation excited Ah-Ling. Words rushed to her lips. With effort she stilled them for a moment and bowed before rising. How could she attempt to express what the foreigners bestowed in their faith and good-will?

"Oh, August Majesty," she said, "it is neither magic nor sorcery, but a wondrous gift the foreigners would give. Sympathy, friendship and great knowledge; and above all, the teaching of the great Christian God. At first it is all difficult to understand—with words but dimly understood, but at last a new light enters life, filling the soul with love, joy and hope unknown to the imprisoned hearts of China's women."

Enkindled animosity and fury within the Empress Dowager broke their bounds. With difficulty she restrained her violent anger as the harsh phrases rang out, chilling

even the unsympathetic and pitiless assembly.

"Thou, the daughter of the Celestial Empire's wisest counselor, hast betrayed her honorable country and forsaken the Gods—the God of Light, Great Buddha, shall not rise again in the heavens to gaze for another day upon a faithless Manchu who has cast off her deities. I command she be cast down the Ning Shou well at sundown."

With closed eyes and a stifled moan Ah-Ling fell forward. Well known was the finality of Old Buddha's commands.

Jung Lu, at the August One's words, started from his seat, face drawn and gray. Such punishment could not be fated for Ah-Ling, his child, no matter what she had done, though her utterances were beyond belief to his ears. A shudder of horror passed over his body; he started to speak—fell on his knees in supplication before Old Buddha, who commanded silence and addressed him.

"Let this be a warning to all undutiful subjects and above all to those evil ones who

forsake their reverence for the Gods of China."

The Empress and attendants left the hall, a procession of magnificent splendor and gorgeous coloring. Tom-toms and cymbals clashed as the swaying palanquin bearing the August One passed out into the court-yard.

PART FIVE

"For speech is but broken light upon the depth of the unspoken."

PART FIVE

JUNG LU was stunned by the truth that Ah-Ling had been converted from the Gods of her ancestors. An affront to the deities was beyond pardon. Human power could not stay the punishment the Gods would demand in revenge for being renounced. His soul cried out in despair, not knowing which way to turn for help.

At length Ah-Ling arose and went before her father. With eyes subserviently cast down, with broken, sorrowful voice she spoke—

"Oh, honorable father, try to forgive thy child." The words choked in her throat and escaped through tremulous lips. "Indeed it was not my desire to disobey thee in unfilial manner, but there remained no other way. Alas, I am overcome with grief and deep re-

gret for thee." Her voice faltered with emotion, then a certain vehemency burst forth in tone and words.

"Why, oh why, have the characters of justice, goodness and humanity, which the Gods are supposed to imprint upon the soul of China's ruler, been effaced? To many others beside thy Ah-Ling is this calamity attended by misfortune."

From the distant end of the hall came loud, hoarse claims for right of entrance. These utterances carried through the court to the ears of Ah-Ling, who started and listened, senses tense. There was no mistaking the familiar voice of old Chêng-Su. Her conscience smote her. Scarcely a fleeting thought in these crowded hours had she given to faithful Chêng-Su.

Anxiously she gazed toward the entrance. Through the great doors, half supported, almost carried by two eunuchs, came old Chêng-Su, still muttering, but in less animated tones.

Jung Lu, aroused from his abject

thoughts, lifted bowed head, while his glance fell upon the tottering form of the old man. With staring eyes and terrorized expression, his hands clutched at the arms of the chair for support—with a sickening feeling he wondered if it were the ghost of Chêng-Su come to taunt him.

Chêng-Su with greatest difficulty controlled his trembling limbs. In one hand he convulsively held a scroll, while the fingers of the other clutched at his throat as though to ease the strain of speech. With gasps, he hoarsely cried, "Master! Master! I come to save Ah-Ling, not myself."

Jung Lu's fright had departed with hearing the voice; intense relief came with the realization that it was Chêng-Su in earthly guise, and that he had left him unconscious, but not lifeless, as he had supposed. What deception and trickery was he playing now?

With flaring wrath Jung Lu demanded, "How dared thou come here, thou cursed fool? What is the scroll in thy hand?" He bent forward and seized the paper from the

trembling hand. His glance scanned the parchment leaves impatiently, then his expression became puzzled. Mystified, with scowling brow, he turned to Chêng-Su.

"How camest thou by this? and what treachery is it?" he questioned heatedly.

"It is mine, Your Excellency," replied Chêng-Su with eager, shaking voice. "Given me by my daughter these many years, treasured as my very eyes, and secreted in my heart."

Jung Lu read the scroll several times, bewildered: he was at a loss what to do. Finally he turned to his equerry with a command, and the officer left the court.

No one spoke in the ensuing moments, each one deep in his own troubled reflections.

Ah-Ling remained with eyes fixed upon Chêng-Su and Jung Lu in turn, as though she would read their inmost thoughts. Her own feelings were tossed between faint hope and fear at these new events. Pity seized her as she gazed upon poor old Chêng-Su: what had happened to him in the past hor-

rible hours? He looked as though the very spirits of hell had played upon his being, leaving a wreck of a soul.

The deafening clash of cymbals brought a surprised murmur to the few remaining in the courtroom, for it meant the return of the August One. This time only a small suite accompanied her. As Her Majesty reached the throne and all kotowed to the ground, Jung Lu went forward and with obeisance sought to give the Dowager Empress the scroll. With a wave of the hand, she refused it, and ordered it to be read.

The necessity of returning to the Court at Jung Lu's request had not improved Old Buddha's ill humor. The incident of the fate of Ah-Ling had been completely crowded from her memory in the great issue of the bombardment of the foreigners. To Her Majesty this scroll was doubtless some petition from the hated ones.

In all haste, Jung Lu intervened with cautious words, "I beg to tell Your Noble

Majesty that this scroll is for Your Honorable Highness' judgment alone."

If His Excellency's unexpected words brought wonder to the Empress, it was not signified in the changeless expression.

The entire assembly was dismissed, and there remained in the hall only Jung Lu, Chêng-Su, and Ah-Ling in the presence of the Empress Tzu Hsi.

When the last person had passed out through the doors, and they were closed, Jung Lu turned to Chêng-Su and commanded that he relate how the scroll came into his possession.

Once more Chêng-Su kotowed and remained on bended knees, as he addressed the August One.

"Your Majesty, when Her Excellency Aut-Teng, first wife of His Excellency Jung Lu, died, she gave this paper, sealed, to my beloved daughter, her lady-in-waiting. Soon after, my beloved daughter also passed into the Vale of Longevity, leaving the sealed scroll in my possession to guard as my

life, and never to break the seal unless the life of His Excellency Jung Lu's daughter, Ah-Ling, were in danger."

When the old man finished his long, halting explanation, the Empress impatiently commanded Jung Lu to read the scroll. In clear, unhesitating voice he read, his whole being intent on fathoming this mysterious, serious affair.

"About the sixth day of the Third Moon, in the year Ton Peng, came into life Pêting Fo-Su-Ah-Ling, of unknown parentage. This infant soon after birth was given into my keeping secretly, by Her Majesty Tzu Hsi. I Aut-Teng, first wife of His Excellency Jung Lu, had suffered when the Gods took for themselves my infant daughter, and Her Majesty wished this young babe to take her place. Under penalty of death, by Old Buddha's command, must I conceal the secret from Jung Lu and the world that the little Ah-Ling is not my flesh and blood.

"In the great sorrowful loss of my own

child, my heart wrapped itself about little Ah-Ling, and ever stronger grew the fear lest in the future she be claimed by her rightful parents. I falsely advised the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi of the infant Ah-Ling's early death. Pêting Fo-Su-Ah-Ling has the birthmark on the right arm, peculiar to the royal clan. As is well known throughout the Empire, a Manchu born with this birthmark, the Gods honor and protect. Evil will descend upon any mortal who would harm those the deities favor on this earth."

His voice ceased and the scroll fell to the floor. The injustice and wrong of the statement roused to the point of defiance his hurt emotions. With a challenging tone he addressed the Empress.

"With my life I have served thee and the Imperial Kingdom. Now by my right, I demand to know the truth of what is contained in this scroll."

Her Majesty remained calm, so undisturbed, in fact, it would seem she had not

heard what had come to pass. Or could it be that the voice of the benumbed conscience was waking but not able to declare itself?

Old Buddha did not look at Jung Lu. but her eyes sought Ah-Ling, who stood close beside Chêng-Su. With hands concealing face the slight body swayed with silent, racking sobs.

Strange to the ears of the others came the voice of the Empress, for it was low, even gentle in tone, with a ring of curiosity.

"Cease thy lamenting, maid, and show the mark on thy arm, if thou art so favored by the Gods."

Silently Ah-Ling drew away her hands from her face and pushed back the cuff from the right hand. Just above the wrist was a small brown mark in the shape of a crescent moon.

A startled cry issued from Jung Lu. The Empress drew back in alarm, but not a word came from the tightly compressed lips.

Jung Lu now fell on his knees and cried, "Oh, Majesty, tell me I beseech thee, what

this means. Who is this child, dear to my heart?"

For the first time Old Buddha looked at Jung Lu. Her eyes faltered as she met his wide, pleading gaze, and then turned away as though they would search the distance of many years. No longer was she the brilliant, domineering ruler, but a woman, tired, dejected; with the cords of human instinct tightening about her heart. Slowly she spoke.

"Jung Lu, this is thy child. I swear by my right hand. I did not tell thy wife Aut-Teng, for I deemed it best that she should believe the infant of unknown parentage."

The Empress hesitated. Jung Lu, old Chêng-Su and Ah-Ling were hanging breathlessly on every word. Then with finality she ended, "More I cannot tell thee," but she was looking now, only at Jung Lu. As their eyes met, did the years all at once pass away leaving the light of memory to explain, where words were forbidden? But this only the Empress and Jung Lu knew.

At length Old Buddha, with effort, seemed to rouse herself from the brooding thoughts which engulfed her honorable person. Once more the familiar voice had the firm, resolute tones as she turned to Ah-Ling and spoke—"It is true that the Gods protect those whom they favor with the sign of the sacred crescent, and by the will of the Gods of thy glorious ancestors, thy life has been spared. But never again shalt thou have intercourse with the barbarians. Here, within the Forbidden City, as befits a proud Manchu, shalt thou remain in filial devotion. Never shall the foreign powers enter the sacred walls where Manchu rule reigns supreme. And though thou hast forgotten this in thy foolish, wayward youth, let the sacred symbol on thy arm ever keep thee in remembrance to be faithful in thy reverence and obligation to the Celestial Empire."

On their knees, in amazement, the intent listeners drank in the Empress' words, scarcely daring to breathe in fear lest the tide of fate change again.

To Chêng-Su it was enough that Ah-Ling had been miraculously dragged back from the border of the great dark Beyond. What did it matter if his exhausted mind could not surmise the true reason for Ah-Ling's redemption and, as many another secret of the Forbidden City, it would remain an unsolved mystery?

Jung Lu was crying out in incoherent sentences his gratitude, intermingled with vows of burning ten million joss sticks before the family deity in honor of the All Highest ruler of the Imperial Kingdom. But the voice of Ah-Ling was silent.

On bended knees, three times, with head to ground, she made obeisance. And, as ever in the life of a Manchu, whether winning life's fullest rewards, or facing death, the lithe body was prostrate in outward homage to the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi. But the heart and soul, far from the foot of the Royal Throne, were striving to pour out in utmost extent, their love and unbounded gratitude to the One and True Great God

of the foreigners who had given her the strength to help them and now in mercy granted her life anew.

The cymbals clashed; the drums beat; the great doors opened and the brilliant rays of sun poured in. As the Dowager Empress in the swaying palanquin was borne down the hall, once more her glance fell upon the kneeling Ah-Ling. And marvelously wonderful was the vision to her august eyes; for the God of light—Great Buddha—as in benediction, had enshrouded the dark head of the maid in a radiant light.

PART SIX

"And you are far, too far for me to see
Your lanterns and your lattices apart
So many moons—so many hundred li—
Yet are you far—when you are in my heart?"

PART SIX

MANY moons had come and gone. The fearful clash between the nations had ended with the complete and ignominious defeat of China by the Foreign Forces. Peace had taken the place of turmoil, and the ancient city was struggling back to tranquillity. And now Ah-Ling, with thankful soul, sought to express in a letter her deepest hopes. The words poured forth in unfettered and exultant freedom:

DIANA, DEAR ONE—

Can it be that these many moons have not been years of anxious, weary, fearful waiting? Waiting and longing to hear news of thee, thy family and the fate of the Foreign Quarters?

Days and days have dragged by while

I have remained imprisoned here, helpless, within the Forbidden City, with the roar of the suffering Manchu city ever in my thoughts.

When the first rumor came that the foreign forces had entered the Tartar walls, the Emperor, Dowager Empress and Court fled to the Summer Palace. Then came the frightful weeks of anxiety and foreboding, when it seemed not a foreigner could withstand the terrific siege and its hardships. At last the news arrived of China's vanquishment and the rescue of the foreigners. Alas, there were many who were beyond help!

I cannot tell thee of my return to the city after I left thee, or what happened in the succeeding time. Under penalty of death, it is locked in my heart. It is perhaps better so—not to awaken thoughts of past torturing events.

But now life is different, the maple trees in the palace gardens are ablaze

and gay with brilliant color, but no less gay is the heart of Ah-Ling.

By the time thou and thy honorable family are preparing for the feast of Christmas, I shall be with thee, also celebrating this beautiful time!

When thy honorable father's letter came through the British Peace Emissary, my august father and Her Majesty called me to audience. I truly believed my ears did not hear aright; what an amazing, changing world it is! The Empress Dowager, in the new Edict of Reform, denotes that national inefficiency means extinction; the base intrigues and artificial sins of the court must pass out. Her Majesty realizes that the forces of the Western world are not to be met and overthrown by the classics, and that China must follow the example of other countries in modern methods of equipment and defense.

The August One not only appreciates the vast superiority of the material

forces of the Occident, but has been convinced of the value of the immense intellectual and political forces.

Above everything the Empress wishes for an understanding and friendship between the nations, and only by knowing foreign teachings, customs and languages can this be accomplished.

Then it was that thy humble friend was consulted if it would please her to go to England at the invitation of the foreign British Minister and visit three or four years, and on returning become first lady-in-waiting to Her Majesty.

This letter is being taken to thee by the British Peace Emissary, with the formal acceptance of the Empress Dowager and my august father. My heart is too full of gratitude for expression. My eyes fill with tears of joyous longing to see thee and thy native land, while deep within me an incredulous voice seems to whisper—Can this be true; all this great happiness?

Such preparation for the departure thou canst not imagine! It would cause thee boundless amusement. If I heeded the advice of all who in interest and kindness give it, thy Ah-Ling would need a fleet of ships to take her and her possessions to England. Her Majesty and my august father insisted on a retinue of retainers, two special cooks, four chair-bearers and four or five other attendants.

At last I persuaded them to let me take only my old "Amah" and a young girl to assist her. Canst thou imagine the consternation of thy honorable mother, should I arrive with another household. Old Buddha and my august father shake their heads at these arrangements, and believe the foreign ways are truly strange.

The thousands of li across the great ocean make the women and maids of the Court look at me in wonder that my teeth do not chatter with fright at the

prospect of living on the waves for so long a time. Their thoughts are filled with desire to protect me, but, alas, it must be also true that kindness often kills. Such potions as have been made for me to drink, both when at sea or when afflicted with foreign ailments, beetle-wings pulverized; strange roots, and many more are the remedies. Then they believe the God of the Sea would always seize for his Court those he can reach from the God of the Earth, so tokens and talismans are pouring in. What a great influence superstition has in these lives! One gives me a sea-gull's wing to wear about my neck on a chain; for the sea-gulls are messengers of the God of the Sea, and this attention would give me great protection. Another presents me with a large live fish, which I must ever keep near by while on the ocean—also to please the God of the Sea. Innumerable are the charms so earnestly believed in. I must take

them all with me and gradually scatter them by the way, for the thoughts of these well-wishing friends must be kindly dealt with.

Once more, before I see thy dear face, I bow to the ground in gratitude and affection; and each day as the great boat sails over the sea, my heart will sing—one day nearer to thee and to my new home, where I shall strive for great knowledge and helpful thoughts to bring back to China.

Oh, may the Imperial Kingdom in her new awakening grow in modern knowledge, never losing her priceless beauty and the wisdom of her illustrious ancestors!

This is the deep desire which sings in the heart of thy

AH-LING.

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